Blackthorne Chapter 3

C. A. Collins

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 The little snot gasped like she’d taken a sucker punch in the gut, a sound that warmed Veronica’s heart. Fucking little Miss Electra, following *Daddy* around just like a second dog. Like a bitch, Veronica thought with a smirk. Moving with elaborate care, Veronica went to the cut-glass decanter and sloshed more of the Paradis in her glass. This time she drank slowly, slow enough to taste the expensive stuff.

 It would be a shame to have to go back to drinking hundred-dollar brandy. No doubt, it was nice having money; that was the only reason she’d married Charles. She hadn’t married him for his talents between the 500 thread Egyptian sheets, that was certain. His brother now . . . Nicky was a *far* more inventive lover. Too good for that Danielle, standing staring out the window alongside little Ashley-Electra, the pair of them prancing around pretending being a sorority girl meant anything besides your family having money. Veronica slammed her brandy back and poured another, spilling a few drops on the antique Safavid rug. Well it could be cleaned, or else the Blackthornes would buy another one.

 I.T.A.T.B.T.S. The old bastard would have left a clue that would mean something to his little art-student pet. Was it the name of some painting? An art conference? Some in-joke from Ash’s childhood? If *Nicky* was the one to find the money, then the two of them could leave dear Charles and sweet little call-me-Danni far behind. Maybe the stuffed suit and the want-to-be deb could hook up. They’d be a perfect match, both of them hollow.

 Veronica parked her ass on the edge of the desk and thought about Edward Arthur Blackthorne. Thinking of an inventive lover . . . Inventive, experienced, with the stamina of a bull. The first time he’s turned those cold blue eyes on her then smiled oh-so slowly at the lust he saw in her face . . ..

 Veronica tried to imagine Ashley’s face if the little snot had walked in on Daddy screwing his eldest son’s wife, Brooks Brothers trousers pushed down, white buttocks pumping like pistons. Silly little bitch would have probably burst into tears and run sobbing from the room.

 Or . . . Veronica remembered what she seen in the other woman’s blue eyes–the same blue as Edward’s–when Ashley confronted her. Raw fury, hatred, a desire to do mayhem. Veronica had drawn back instinctively, as if she’d confronted a snake poised to strike. It hadn’t been the first time Veronica had ever seen crazy staring back at her; she just hadn’t expected that from Daddy’s little girl. And *that* had been for suggesting Edward hadn’t been a saint. Faced with proof that Daddy had a man’s needs, what would Ashley do?

 Veronica took another drink of her brandy and wondered if Daddy Blackthorne had ever turned those confident, possessive eyes on his daughter. She stared across the room at the back of Ashley’s dark curls. Call-me-Danni had an arm wrapped around the smaller woman’s shoulders.

 That’s right, comfort the little snot, Veronica thought, slamming the last of her brandy. No one will ever expect Daddy’s little girl to be able to cope.

 And here was Jenkins back, escorting Charlotte. She gave the room a bright, slightly unfocused smile before stepping forward to draw Charles into a hug. Releasing him, she turned to Nicky and wrapped her arms around him in turn.

 The boys got their looks from their mother, but neither son had dyed his dark-blond hair a pink to match an Audi. The last time Veronica had seen her mother-in-law, a holiday visit the previous year, Charlotte’s hair had been red-and-white striped, like a candy cane. It was impossible to dislike Charlotte, Veronica thought with a smile for her mother-in-law

 Impossible unless you were Ashley. When Charlotte stepped toward her Ashley stepped back, giving her mother a cool look.

Even from the back, Veronica thought Charlotte looked dejected at the rejection. Veronica stood up, only a little unsteadily. “Charly! It’s *so* good to see you!”

Charlotte turned around, her face lighting up, and crossed the Berber to hug Veronica exuberantly. The top of her head came barely to Veronica’s eyes and she smelled slightly of patchouli. Charlotte’s journey of self-discovery taken her down any number of back roads before winding her up embracing new age spirituality, but Charlotte was new-age with pots of money. She was open and friendly and–as far as Veronica could tell–utterly without guile and, most importantly, she approved of Charles’ wife.

“I love the hair!” Veronica told her.

Charlotte beamed, reaching up to pat the half-inch long pink spikes. Behind her Ashley scowled. Danielle mirroring the expression. Being friendly to Charlotte annoyed the snot, a bonus.

Here came Charles, looking long suffering, to take his mother’s arm and lead her to a seat on one of the couches. Veronica started to follow, only to have the world spin on her. She sat back down on the desk.

Charlotte was sitting between her sons, one hand affectionately on Charles’ knee, still smiling warmly. “I received the most extraordinary letter!” she burbled. “A letter purporting to have information about Edward!”

A babble broke out, everyone asking questions at once. Veronica stared at the decanter. Somehow, someone had emptied it while she wasn’t paying attention. I.T.A.T.B.T.S. Maybe it would mean something to Charlotte?

Bit by bit the hubbub died down while Charlotte sat blinking at her family.

“Where was it posted from?”

Everyone turned to stare at Danielle who blushed.

Charlotte shook her head. “Do you know, I didn’t check.” She dug into her *Hermes Birkin* bag–bright pink–and came up with several sheets of paper including a bent envelope. “Miami. It’s postmarked Miami.”

That seemed to mean something to Danielle whose eyes widened. It meant nothing to the other Blackthornes who began shouting questions again all at once. Charlotte sat on the couch, still holding the letter and the envelope.

“Is it from the old bastard?” Charles yelled over the rest of the family.

“Charles,” his mother said reprovingly. Charles opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and looked away. Nicky was smirking, and Ashley, Veronica noted, was scowling at everyone on the couch as if she couldn’t decide who she loathed more, her brothers or her mother. Veronica remembered the red rage writhing behind those blue eyes and wished there was some brandy left.

“What did the letter say?” Nicky asked.

“Well,” Charlotte began, “it started by saying that there was a reason Edward needed to disappear and that Bobby would be able to tell us more.”

“Bobby?” Nicky asked.

Charlotte blinked. “Robert Voight? Your father’s partner way back? You remember him, Charles, he was your god-father.”

Charles flushed. “He was an embezzler.”

Veronica vaguely remembered a scandal, nearly twenty years ago. One of the partners in E&R Construction Ltd. had fled the country with something like $15,000,000 in company funds and disappeared off the face of the earth. She’d run across it when she was researching the family she was marrying into. There was something more involved, but she couldn’t bring it to mind. What was it? There’d been so many scandals, one two decades old hadn’t seemed that important.

Never mind, she’d look it up later. The Blackthornes clustered around Charlotte looked just as confused as she currently was.

“What does the letter say, *exactly*?” Danielle asked.

It was a good question, even if it was from call-me-Danni. Charlotte blinked at the paper she was holding. There was dear Charles, his hands clenching in fists rather than snatch the letter away from his mother. Even Nicky was leaning in, impatient too, if hiding it better than his brother.

Charlotte unfolded the paper carefully, and held it close to her nose. Veronica wasn’t sure if it was (doctor phobia) or absentmindedness that kept Charlotte from having Lasik done, but it had to be vanity that kept her from getting glasses.

“Well, my dears,” she said at last, “it begins rather oddly: All around the chimney pot, The monkey chased the weasel, The monkey stopped to tie his shoe. Didn’t you ever wonder why Teddy had to hide? The things he could tell you about his partner. You should ask him the next time he’s in town. Then there are some numbers (lat/long Cuba) And then: Sweet Charlotte, did you know where your husband went, when he took those trips? Did you think it was another woman? Silly, silly, Charly-Barley. It was so much more than that.”

Charles held out a hand that was trembling slightly and his mother gave him the letter. He read through it, eyes flicking back and forth before tossing the paper down with some force. Nicky snatched it up and read it himself then shook his head. Ashley walked over and held out an imperious hand for the letter. Her brother passed it over without a word.

Ashley scanned through it, once, twice, then shook the paper at Charlotte. “What does it mean‽”

Charlotte blinked at her daughter. “I have no idea, Ashley. Your father took frequent business trips. There was a time that he was frequently gone for weeks at a time. It was before you were born, of course. After . . . Edward changed when you were born, Ashley. Suddenly he wanted to be home. For three years we were a family.

“And then there was the embezzlement and that poor secretary being found dead and the trial. It broke him, it really did,” Charlotte sighed. “He wasn’t the same afterward.”

There were tears glinting on the little snot’s cheeks. Veronica thought about the Edward Blackthorne she’d known and tried to imagine him as a family man, or even caring about someone or something besides himself and money. Even the dog had been more about photo-ops; the great man has a human side.

I.T.A.T.B.T.S. What could it stand for? There were 200 acres of ground on this estate, not to mention all the other properties Blackthorn Enterprises owned. It had to be something that would mean something to little Miss Electra, once she stopped emoting and started thinking. Veronica needed to puzzle it out first. She’d ask Charles about family jokes and see if he could come up with anything. As long as he thought she was on his side, Charles would be happy to share resources with her and her husband wasn’t clever enough to solve the riddle himself.

I.T.A.T.B.T.S. Veronica stared out the window at the lake on the grounds. If no one came up with the answer it would be two years before the family could have Edward declared dead.

Charlotte was smiling tearfully at her children. “I know Edward wasn’t a warm man but . . . Your father loved all of you, he really did, never doubt that.”

Charlotte might actually believe that. Veronica remembered how the man had treated his sons, competing with them, pitting them against each other. He *might* have loved his daughter, but if he had it was the love of a man for a prized possession.

“He wasn’t good at showing his emotions but Charles, when the hospital put you in his arms for ,the first time, he cried. And he planted a tree for each of you when you were born, so there would always be something of you here with him even after you were grown and had lives of your own.”

Not that any of Edward Arthur’s children had moved on. So Charles and his oak, Nicky and his walnut and Ashley and her ash were all still on the estate.

I.T.A.T.B.T.S. Veronica thought, and closed her mouth which had been gaping unbecomingly. Ashley’s ash tree, still with its (architect expensive) designed tree-house stood beside the stables. None of the ground crew would touch that tree, even now that Edward wasn’t here to fire anyone who so much as pruned it without permission. Could the clue be as simple as that? The moment she was steady enough to climb the ladder, Veronica was going to check for herself and see what Edward might have left in the treehouse.